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After a Flood: Cooperation, Patience Safety Keys

INDIANAPOLIS -- Many people evacuated because of flooding in Northwest Indiana are wondering what to do now and when they can get back into their homes.

“Local officials decide when evacuated residents can return to their homes,” said Phil Brown, interim director of the IDHS Division of Emergency Response. “The primary goal in any emergency situation is the safety of residents.”

Brown is offering the following guidelines to help residents in the affected areas.

- Avoid disaster areas because your presence might hamper rescue and other emergency operations. Also, you are at further risk from contaminated water, damaged roads and other hazards.
- Continue to listen to a weather radio, or local radio or television stations for information updates. Return home only when authorities indicate it is safe to do so. Flood dangers do not end when the water begins to recede. Buildings could have hidden damage or damage to gas, electric or water lines.
- Stay out of buildings if flood waters remain around the building, because they may have undermined foundations and the buildings could collapse.

When You Return Home

- Inspect foundations for cracks or other damage which could render the building uninhabitable.
- Avoid smoking inside buildings. Smoking in confined areas can cause fires.
- Wear sturdy shoes. The most common injury in a disaster is cuts to the feet.
- Use battery-powered lights when examining buildings. This prevents potential shocks and fire hazards.
- Check for gas leaks. If you smell gas or hear a blowing or hissing noise, open a window and quickly leave the building. Turn off the gas at the outside main valve if you can and call the gas company from a neighbor's home. If you turn off the gas for any reason, it must be turned back on by a professional.
- Look for electrical system damage. If you see sparks or broken or frayed wires, or if you smell burning insulation, leave the house and call the fire department.
- Check for sewage and water line damage. If you suspect sewage lines are damaged, avoid using the toilets and call a plumber. If water pipes are damaged, contact the water company or a plumber and avoid using water from the tap.

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- Watch out for animals that may have come into buildings with the flood waters. Use a stick to poke through debris. Flood waters flush many animals out of their homes.
- Watch for loose plaster, drywall, and ceilings that could fall.
- Take pictures of the damage, both of the building and its contents, for insurance claims.
- Throw away food that has come in contact with flood waters. Some canned foods may be salvageable. If the cans are dented or damaged, throw them away. Food contaminated by flood waters can cause severe infections.
- If water is of questionable purity, it can be treated for use. Go to www.in.gov/dhs/files/water_treatment.pdf.
- Wells inundated by flood waters should be tested for purity before drinking. If in doubt, call your local public health department. Ill health effects often occur when people drink water contaminated with bacteria and germs.
- Pump out flooded basements gradually (about one-third of the water per day) to avoid structural damage. If the water is pumped completely in a short period of time, pressure from water-saturated soil on the outside could cause basement walls to collapse.
- Service damaged septic tanks, cesspools, pits, and leaching systems as soon as possible. Damaged sewage systems are health hazards. Note: Contact local health department before making repairs to septic systems.

In 2005, the State of Indiana consolidated all of its emergency management and homeland security efforts into one department by creating the Indiana Department of Homeland Security (IDHS). The divisions of IDHS are Emergency Response, Fire and Building Safety; the Indiana Intelligence Fusion Center; Planning and Assessment; Preparedness and Training; and Support Services. These divisions intertwine to accomplish the central mission of IDHS: safeguarding the lives and property of the citizens of Indiana.

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